

PART A - Initial Equality Screening Assessment

1. Title	
Title: Best Start Plan 2026 - 2029	
Directorate: Children and Young People's Services	Service area: Commissioning, Quality and Performance
Lead person: Helen Sweatton	Contact number: 07554436546
Is this a:	
☒ Strategy / Policy	☐ Service / Function
☐ Other	
If other, please specify	

2. Please provide a brief description of what you are screening
The DfE issued targets for Local Authorities (LAs) to improve Good Level of Development (GLD) as part of its "Best Start in Life" strategy, aiming for 75% of 5-year-olds nationally to reach GLD by 2028 issuing new data tools and funding to guide local planning and intervention. This report provides an overview of current activity across Rotherham to improve early years outcomes, tackling inequalities, and ensure all children, especially disadvantaged ones, get a strong foundation for school, contributing to the Council's wider ambition that children and young people achieve. The report outlines the key activity undertaken in developing the new Best Start Plan, including a comprehensive needs analysis, engagement and consultation. The report seeks approval of the Best Start Plan and outlines the timeline for implementation to achieve the ambitions identified.

3. Relevance to equality and diversity
The Best Start plan will support children in Rotherham and their families to improve early years outcomes. Tackling inequalities, to ensure all children, especially disadvantaged ones, get a strong foundation for school, contributing to the Council's wider ambition that children and young people achieve. The target for the general population across Rotherham is to improve Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028 for at least 73.3% of 5-year-olds, however this must include at least 56.6% of 5-year-olds eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). Research highlights that certain groups are disproportionately vulnerable due to underlying inequalities. These inequalities increase the likelihood of not achieving outcomes.. This plan reflects Rotherham's commitment to unite efforts across the Borough to enhance early years experiences and create a more equitable future for all.

Priorities • Strengthening early communication, language and literacy for all children • Increasing early education access for disadvantaged children • Improving the quality of early years provision, including Reception for all children • Identifying needs early and supporting children with SEND and vulnerable families • Providing joined-up family support through our Family Hubs • Tackling inequalities across the 0–5 system		
Questions	Yes	No
Could the proposal have implications regarding the accessibility of services to the whole or wider community?	x	
Could the proposal affect service users?	x	
Has there been or is there likely to be an impact on an individual or group with protected characteristics?	x	
Have there been or likely to be any public concerns regarding the proposal?		x
Could the proposal affect how the Council's services, commissioning or procurement activities are organised, provided, located and by whom?	x	
Could the proposal affect the Council's workforce or employment practices?		x
If you have answered no to all the questions above, please explain the reason		

If you have answered **no** to all the questions above, please complete **sections 5 and 6**.

If you have answered **yes** to any of the above, please complete **section 4**.

4. Considering the impact on equality and diversity
Equality and human rights are considered within the strategy. Part A Equalities Screening is attached as appendix 2.
How have you considered equality and diversity? Rotherham has 14, 893 children aged 0-4 according to the 2023 mid-year population estimate. In Rotherham 29.1% of pupils are eligible for FSM, this compares to an average of 24.6% across England Authorities. 23.5% of pupils have either a statutory plan for Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND), known as an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), or are receiving SEND support (previously known as school action and school action plus). This compares to an average of 19.6% across all England Authorities. In the 2023/ 24 academic year 64.3% of Rotherham 5-year-olds met the expectation for a Good Level of Development (GLD). In the 2024/25 academic year Rotherham's GLD rate was 65.0%. This is slightly below National (68.3%), Yorkshire & Humber (66.3%), and Statistical Neighbours (66.4%).

Despite strengths, 35% of children are not achieving GLD — a significant proportion needing targeted support. To meet the local target of 73.3%, Rotherham needs an increase of 8.3 percentage points within three years from the current 65.0%.

Key findings

Rotherham has a strong foundation in early developmental outcomes in the first years of life, high levels of engagement with Family Hubs and Children's Centres, and strong uptake of early education among most groups. Nonetheless, several critical challenges remain:

- Developmental inequalities persist and widen between the ages of 2½ and school entry, particularly for boys, children from low-income families, and children in deprived neighbourhoods.
- Literacy and communication difficulties are some of the primary barriers to achieving a Good Level of Development.
- Rising SEND demand, including a 44% increase in EHCPs, is placing significant pressure on services.
- Early education takes up gaps in the most disadvantaged areas, indicating a need for targeted intervention.
- School readiness outcomes at the end of Reception remain below national expectations despite strong early progress at age 2–2½.

Implications for the Best Start Local Plan

- To address these challenges, the Best Start Local Plan will prioritise:
- Maintaining high levels of Family Hub and Children's Centre engagement while tailoring services to emerging needs.
- Enhancing early SEND identification, specialist support, and inclusive early years practice.
- Strengthening early language, literacy and communication pathways from birth to age 5.
- Targeting support to disadvantaged communities, focusing on narrowing gaps in early development and school readiness.
- Improving early education access in the most deprived areas through targeted outreach and provider capacity building.
- Strengthening the transition pathway from early years settings into school to maintain strong development trajectories.

Rotherham Council's ambition for a family-friendly Borough, where all children and young people achieve, ensures child-focused strategies create a golden thread aligning high level goals with practical, community-based support focused on early intervention and integrated partnership working.

The Rotherham Council Plan (2025–2030) includes the establishment of Best Start Family Hubs creating a network of main and satellite Family Hubs to provide a single point of access to advice and support. Expansion of Early Education to create capacity to meet the government's expanded 30-hour free childcare entitlement for working parents of children from 9 months to age five by September 2025 and activity to address inequality including the provision of cost-of-living support packages, auto-enrolment of eligible children for free school meals and school uniform assistance.

The Health and Wellbeing Strategy commitment to “Enable all children and young people up to age 25 to have the best start in life, maximise their capabilities and have influence and control over their lives” underpins a partnership response which starts before a child is conceived. This includes activity in community health to facilitate easier access to wellness services via the launch of the "Rotherhive" digital platform, delivery of the universal Baby Packs and targeted outreach support focusing on improving take-up of early education places in specific areas like Central Rotherham to close development gaps.

The Children and Young People’s transformation workstream under the Health and Care Place Plan was instrumental in the development of the Best Start and Beyond Framework. Key activities include the Health and Wellbeing Board’s “Supporting a Breastfeeding Borough” declaration and the development and delivery of the associated "Rotherham Backs Breastfeeding" campaign, community support and early identification of speech and language needs.

Key activities in the Early Help Strategy include the expansion of the physical and digital Family Hub Start for Life offer, including midwifery, health visiting, "Stay and Play" sessions and multi-sensory baby development classes (e.g., Bloom Baby, Toddler Sense) to promote language and emotional bonding, as well as access to evidenced-based parenting support and a range of targeted family help.

Actions

All stakeholders have an essential role to play in improving the number of children who achieve a good level of development in Rotherham, the Council and all of its partners, including the NHS, Early Years, Education, Family Help and the voluntary and community sector are already working together.

Health services provide key developmental reviews and performance in this area is high and compares positively to regional and national averages.

The Family Information Service promotes activities, SEND updates, and regular communications to strengthen family support.

Parenting initiatives are delivered via Family Hubs, complemented by home learning programs that promote parental engagement.

Community engagement is enhanced through partnerships with the voluntary sector, for example Grimm & Co, which deliver creative literacy, cultural storytelling, and parental support, alongside links to Sheffield Hallam for impact evaluation.

Professional development is embedded through the annual Early Years Conference, bespoke school visits, ROSIS-led moderation and best practice meetings, and targeted training on curriculum, assessment, and EYFS requirements.

Date to scope and plan your Equality Analysis:	03 February 2026
Date to complete your Equality Analysis:	03 February 2026

Lead person for your Equality Analysis (Include name and job title):	Helen Sweaton, Joint Service Director Commissioning, Quality and Performance
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5. Governance, ownership and approval		
Please state here who has approved the actions and outcomes of the screening:		
Name	Job title	Date
Nicola Curley	Director of Children's Services	04 February 2026

6. Publishing	
This screening document will act as evidence that due regard to equality and diversity has been given. If this screening relates to a Cabinet, key delegated officer decision, Council, other committee or a significant operational decision a copy of the completed document should be attached as an appendix and published alongside the relevant report. A copy of all screenings should also be sent to equality@rotherham.gov.uk For record keeping purposes it will be kept on file and also published on the Council's Equality and Diversity Internet page.	
Date screening completed	03 February 2026
Report title and date	Best Start Plan 2026 - 2029
If relates to a Cabinet, key delegated officer decision, Council, other committee or a significant operational decision – report date and date sent for publication	16 March 2026
Date screening sent to Performance, Intelligence and Improvement equality@rotherham.gov.uk	04 February 2026